

## Coerced or Committed? Rabbi Maury Grebenau

On the heels of Shavout we must ask ourselves what is the message of this time of year that we can take with us into the summer. Unlike the other festivals of Pesach and Sukkot, Shavout is a quick two days which can seem almost a whirlwind (or one long nap if we tried to stay up all night) that can pass us by rather quickly. What idea can we discover in the holiday of Shavout which can relate to our everyday lives?

There is a fascinating piece in the Talmud which gives us a puzzling snapshot of the events that took place at the foot of Mount Sinai when we were gathered to receive the Torah. The Talmud (Shabbos 88a), basing itself on the verse that grammatically reads we camped *under* the mountain (instead of at the foot of the mountain), informs us that Hashem held the mountain over our heads and threatened to bury us alive if we did not accept the Torah. This is a shocking revelation; it seems that we were forced into accepting the Torah! The Talmud continues that we did in fact accept the Torah willingly at a later date, in the times of the Purim story, but still we find the description unsettling.

When we examine this piece of Talmud a bit deeper we begin to find the source of our unease with this picture. Our general picture of the acceptance of the Torah is one of great joy and anticipation, and for good reason. Another piece of Talmud on the very same page tells us that when we were approached about accepting the Torah we excitedly announced to Hashem, "*Naaseh V'Nishma*" "We will do, and then we will listen." We were prepared to accept the Torah without even knowing what we were getting ourselves into. So great was our drive to form a bond with Hashem and become His nation that we were ready to sign on the dotted line without even reading the contract! If so, how are we to understand the coercion that is mentioned in the Talmud? If we were so excited and willing what need was there for force?

The Maharal (a scholar in sixteenth-century Prague) gives an answer which should resonate with us in our spiritual search. He explains that we would have gladly accepted the Torah of our own free will and yet this was not sufficient. Our spiritual lives are full of ups and downs. There are times that we are at a spiritual high, excited and inspired to serve Hashem and push ourselves to fulfill our religious potential. At other times we feel a sense of lacking. Uninspired and tired from our lives, we don't feel any sense of urgency in our pursuit of spirituality and service of G-d. If we were only to have accepted the Torah willingly it would have opened the door to only serving Hashem when we felt inspired to do so. On days when we were less than enthusiastic about prayer, Torah study and other commandments, we would have bowed out claiming that we willingly accepted the Torah and now have decided to decline the privilege.

Hashem forced a commitment on our part which keeps us in the relationship even when we might rather not be as engaged in our Torah Judaism. We must not look at it as coercion, but rather as a commitment to our relationship with Hashem. Much like a strong marriage where a couple weathers the rough waves on the back of the commitment

of love they have forged with each other. So too, we are able to continue to strive and grow in our religious lives even at times when we feel lackluster and uninspired. The national and personal commitment that each and every soul in the Jewish nation made to Hashem on that very first Shavout binds us to Hashem even in our less motivated hours. Let us take the commitment forged on Shavout and have it guide us in our every day thoughts and deeds.